Teaching and learning in Japan

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Introduction: Japanese theories of learning

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We see teaching and learning more clearly today, not just in Japan, but in all advanced societies. Learning is a major component of the intellectual consciousness of our day; we understand learning as something that occurs not just in schools and among children, but throughout society and throughout life. It is central to organizational change, social order, economic competition, and a host of other social processes. Viewed inclusively, the world of learning is rich in practices and understandings that vary in historical time, cultural space, and institutional context. The range of "things" to be learned is enormous – facts, endurance, maturity, peace of mind, empathy, physical coordination, judgment, persistence, morality, faith, concentration, trust, and so on. How these things are taught differs greatly from society to society and reflects basic understandings about such matters as human nature and the nature of knowledge. Our growing awareness of the importance of teaching and learning allows us to see not only how ubiquitous these processes are, but also how varied and interconnected.

Most research on learning focuses on distinguishing the psychological factors and processes performed by individuals in relation to specific tasks. Our formal theories of learning and teaching derive largely from the Anglo-American tradition of educational psychology. We are finding that the often reified Western theories that have dominated our perceptions and research seriously hinder our ability to perceive the numerous uncodified worlds of teaching and learning that abound in each society. Knowledge of these worlds, especially comparative knowledge, promises to be of great practical and heuristic value in our continuing pursuit of the goal of opening up our under-

standing of learning and teaching to the great variety that exists.

We also want to understand the way patterns of learning are organized in whole societies, in institutions, in groups, and in individual experience. To do this, we must look at more than just individual task performance or the standard curriculum of schools. Ours is an age of information, of thinking rather than manufacturing, of whole societies competing with each other using various kinds of collective intelligence. It is an age increasingly defined by the necessity to reflect upon ourselves collectively and to transform how we learn as a result. For premodern societies, "How do you teach?" or "What do you learn?" are, as a rule, nonquestions. But for industrial societies, such questions strike at the heart of the process of adaptive change.

The studies gathered in this volume are united by the common goal of understanding teaching and learning in Japan as it actually occurs. All of them seek to answer questions about the actual conduct of learning in different settings and at different points in the life cycle. The authors in this volume have set out to explore the expectations and associations found in specific Japanese situations. The methodologies employed are diverse, but the focus remains on grasping the details of practice and their implications for our understanding of basic Japanese themes and formulas for learning. Each is based on intense firsthand observations. Some are ethnographic in nature, some are experiential, and some are based on formal methods. All seek to reveal the richness of everyday activity.

The overarching questions the book as a whole seeks to explore include the following: (1) Can we begin to define the range of contexts (traditional and contemporary, private and public) that the Japanese have perfected as learning environments? (2) What do these contents have in common? (3) How and why do they differ? (4) Can we fathom underlying cultural formulations that distinguish Japanese teaching and learning? Can we perceive an overall structure to this variety in cultural time and space (a single landscape, so to speak)? Although each chapter seeks to describe a specific context, the overall goal is to construct a whole picture embracing the diversity and underlying commonalities. We seek to discover dynamics among the parts of the larger landscape. We recognize the existence of many

other contexts that could also be included if we had enough space. (Traditional apprenticeships and company small-group learning are two of the most obvious.)

Collectively, the studies presented here help us to see how the Japanese understand learning. The understandings are naive, cultural, controversial, and even contradictory in many cases, but they are real in that they are embedded in practice. In this there is both good news and bad news. The good news is that by the end of this book, readers can expect to have learned a great deal about teaching and learning in Japan and to have grasped certain common patterns, even "philosophies," that underlie the diversity. The bad news is that readers will just as certainly have come away with an uncomfortable sense of the complexities involved, the internal ironies, and the fact that this or that Japanese approach may seem an exemplar on the surface, but the deeper we dig the more we have to face the fact that it contains implications and cultural trade-offs that are far from attractive. If there are lessons from Japan in what follows, there are also some sobering realities.

The paradoxes and contradictions found in the Japanese culture of learning should stand as a warning: We simplify Japan at the risk of adequate understanding. Japan's contradictions reflect our own expectations – for example, a culture that makes sense because it is homogeneous in its basic values and assumptions. The contradictions of our own beliefs become apparent when we attempt to view Japanese ideas through them. This has much to do with our wish to learn from Japan. Rather than borrowing certain instructional techniques, the most important lesson may be to be able to see more clearly, via a rich comparison, what we do and why: to become conscious of the basic assumptions we make about learning.

Most of the learning we do will *not* be done in schools. Learning occurs within institutions such as the family, the factory, the office, or various leisure groups. But schools and school learning do provide powerful models or paradigms of teaching and learning in industrial societies. By expanding our inquiry into various areas, we can explore basic, universally recognized models of learning. We can ask: Are the practices the same? Are the understandings the same? Using a variety of case studies and relating them to each other, we can assemble a description of the landscape of learning within a given society.

The present world system is also colored by the perception that some societies are better at this "learning business" than others. We have mountains of reports and papers that enjoin us to boost education in order to increase our economic success, social justice, individual creativity, and even the democratic process. Here again, systems of public education dominate our attention and set the limits of our inquiry into teaching and learning. We pay enormous attention to the school and the classroom, but rarely, if ever, do we seek to locate the topic of learning within the totality of human activities. The crucial and ubiquitous interface of daily interaction between someone designated as a "teacher" (including "experience") and others designated as "learners" occurs in a variety of settings, day after day, year after year. The accumulation of thousands of such experiences forms patterns and produces monumentally important differences in the formation of both human resources and social forms. Whether we are comparing school systems, companies, or whole national populations, what happens in face-to-face learning environments remains the most difficult area to fathom cross-culturally – and therefore, despite its critical importance, one that is easily neglected.

Taken as a whole, any society's landscape of learning is rich in contradictions and complementarities. Institutions may reinforce each other, echoing common themes in their pedagogical patterns, or they may contradict each other in their approaches, producing jarring learning experiences for large sections of a given populace.

Each nation seems to have its own emphases, blind spots, and styles. In this book, these issues emerge as the authors analyze various models of learning. Together, these analyses comprise an example of a national landscape of learning. The examples considered do not exhaust the great variety in Japan by any means, but they allow us to understand better (1) the rich coherence of specific contexts, (2) the variability even within Japan, and (3) the place of school-based systems in the broader social context.

During the conference at which the papers in this volume were first assembled, the authors discussed their separate case studies and became increasingly aware of underlying patterns and themes. The ubiquity of these patterns (produced primarily at the level of face-to-face interaction) is stunning when

the range of social circumstances is considered. Much of the socialization of children, the transmission of traditional knowledge and values, the adaptive efforts of organizations, the development of adult resources, and the transmission of new knowledge in nonschool settings rests, it appears, on remarkably common and taken-for-granted basic practices associated with learning.

What are the sources of this hidden unity? All Japanese experience many forms of teaching and learning as they mature, first of all, and these forms serve as a reservoir or set of micromodels for learning and teaching that form the basis for such activities in adult institutions. Having participated in many variations of the common learning patterns as children, every Japanese has a developed set of core expectations about how teaching and learning should occur. A cultural code of appropriate behavior, learned early, is thus available throughout society and throughout the learner's life.

These expectations include beliefs about the correct or true nature of relations between a teacher and a learner, between one teacher and another, between student and student, and between school and parents. "Teacher" (*sensei/shidosha*) is a social role in schools, companies, and artistic pursuits, part of a set of fundamental relationships that include emotional and social obligations not conveyed by the equivalent English term; in Japanese, "teacher" is a symbol that triggers a range of associations and emotions for virtually all members of society. Whether in a monastery or a factory, those Japanese designated as *sensei/shidosha* are understood and judged within a framework of culture-specific expectations.

It is obvious that human development embraces much more than childhood, and learning is not limited to schooling. For our purposes, then, let us define the timeline of learning we are addressing here as beginning with the entrance to school and lasting until the individual ceases to have a desire or capacity to continue learning. Within this framework we ask: What sequences or stages in the process of learning do people see? Do these stages differ between different kinds of learning? How do these sequences of learning fit with conceptions of adulthood, personal growth, and spiritual fulfillment? Are gender differences significant? Is there an overall structure? To combine these queries into one: How do Japanese models of human

nature and personal growth that exist for early childhood relate to those found in adult life?

Time: developmental expectations and ideals of learning

The entrance of the child in school is perhaps the single most basic step along the road to adulthood. At home the child is the central (often the sole) focus of parental attention. It is known that the ideal Japanese mother's life is carefully orchestrated around high standards of care for the young child. Entrance into preschool is a transition clearly understood in Japan to mark the beginning of a socialization process by which the child comes to see himself or herself as part of larger social groupings (Hendry, 1986; Lewis, 1989; Peak, 1989). The schooling process takes the child from a familial environment where individual attention and dependency are predominant through middle school, where the child is but one of many students in an increasingly formalized structure.

This intense socialization to group processes apparently does not produce the traumatic results we as Americans would expect (Peak, 1991). Critics of the Japanese system of education (both here and in Japan) continue to denounce the system as one that stifles individuality and produces a docile body politic. As Nancy Sato and Catherine Lewis make clear in this volume, before we can definitively say how Japanese education affects individuality, we need to look closely at various stages and to know the basic transformations that individuals are expected to make in their development.

The social context of elementary schooling has many positive aspects that have been largely ignored to date. The most basic orientations defining the stage of early schooling (K-4) are the focus on a group context (referred to in Japan as *shudan seikatsu*) and the notion that children of this age develop best if left to follow their own curiosity and find their own concentration levels. This latter understanding is rarely discussed explicitly, but one encounters it in the literature on childrearing (Lewis, 1989). A range of Japanese practices indicate that it is commonly assumed that children up to the age of 10 develop best when allowed to follow their own inclinations. The natural child is quite individualistic and idiosyncratic, and spontaneous

expression generally receives much toleration in elementary schools. Instructional approaches adapted to the nature of the young child are characterized by a facilitative role for teachers and considerable student–student interaction. Group emphases do not overwhelm individual inclinations at this stage.

The socialization into different learning environments from preschool to high school is surprisingly persistent, incremental, and consistent in its direction. Peak (1991) and, in this volume, Lewis and Kotloff offer a persuasive portrait of this transition that allows us to see how family attachments are gradually shifted to peer groups and how demands on the child are slowly increased over the years of elementary school. Given the relative encouragement of dependency by parents and the pressures of exam competition beginning in late elementary school, we would expect and often find some stress and trauma associated with the discontinuities involved. The essays by LeTendre and Fukuzawa describe the key transitional role that middle schools play in this transition. The gradual trend in early education, then, is sharply mediated in middle school and again at the point of entry into postsecondary education.

As we know from work on high schools (Rohlen, 1983; Okano, 1993), secondary-level teaching employs a pedagogy almost entirely dependent on teacher-centered lectures to large classes of students engaged in note taking for the purpose of passing exams. The use of small groups for instructional purposes is extremely rare, and student presentations are limited. Classroom proceedings center on the teacher, who elaborates at length on a fixed lesson. Indeed, comparing elementary and high school instruction, one wonders if they are part of the same system.

The basic routines established in K-9, it appears, make possible the subsequent, rather dramatic change in academic teaching style at the secondary level. In this volume, numerous authors provide rich evidence of routines that later serve as foundations for the basis of instructional order in many adult contexts. Small-group discussions, cooperative chores, peer pressure to manage disruptions, and *hansei* (self-reflective criticism) are all examples that are subsequently found in high schools, university clubs, and company training programs. The rotation of leadership responsibilities in small groups, as well as many other such practices, are also in evidence throughout the Japa-

nese landscape of learning. What seems to change, then, is not the fundamental habits and routines or guidance practices, but rather the basic focus of the development effort.

Having by high school mastered the basic routines, students and teachers need not focus their energies on organizational ordering. Instead of spending time on this, they concentrate in most schools on the looming entrance examinations to university. Middle school and high school together are a time when students are expected to move beyond being well socialized to being challenged to strive for personal attainment in a narrowing and competitive field of knowledge.

It is safe to say that the successes of Japanese high school students on comparative math and science achievement tests rest heavily on a foundation of prior teaching and socialization that had nothing to do with the cramming or rote learning associated with high school instructional processes. The crucial routines and values of elementary and middle school education, which researchers in both Japan and the United States are only recently emphasizing, are critical but not highly visible aspects of most high schools. The topography of instruction gradually shifts as exams approach, so to speak, but the underlying geology does not change. We need to keep this complexity in mind when judging the Japanese system, for to fail to see its stages as part of a larger whole is to distort what is clearly a 12-year process. Although shifts may be far-reaching, as the essays on middle school illustrate, they are all well within a single process.

Constructing a general framework of differences

Is there an underlying conceptual framework that gives meaning to this process, or is it largely the accretion of historical forces and cultural eclecticism: a long history of cultural borrowing, occupational reform superimposed on previous nationalist and militaristic practices, economic growth, and so forth? Although many educators would hesitate to suggest a broad and underlying frame of meaning, there are persistent similarities that point to such a framework.

If we think of the educational process as enmeshed in developmental ideals of the life course derived from indigenous, Confucian, and Buddhist ideas, such a framework can be recognized. From the perspective of character building (Rohlen in

this volume), stricter discipline and increasing challenges must be part of the adolescent experience for a successful transition from childhood to adulthood to occur. In this perspective, the ordeal of exam preparation and the increasing severity of teachers are necessary and positive aspects of growing up. One might even say that the stages of development move from a focus on curiosity, spontaneity, energy, and collective activity to one that emphasizes individual work, suffering, and attainment through personal spiritual development. This transition has many parallels in the transition from Shinto to Buddhism. In this regard, there is even reason to argue that ontogeny appears to replicate cultural history. Although teachers, for example, decry the distortions of teaching to the entrance exams, it is evident that they also feel students need to be challenged in order to advance spiritually and emotionally. Exams are a character-building challenge. By grades 8 and 9, children are seen as ready for an adult-like seriousness, a controlled, purposeful course of action. Without the focus of the entrance examinations, teachers would have to invent new challenges in order to realize their conceptions of how children should be guided into adulthood.

If socialization to the group is the goal of stage one, and stage two is a matter of increased challenge, self-discipline, and concentrated effort, stage three is far more varied. Some students go to university, where they may spend most of their time in intense group activities. Others go to work and encounter another cycle of socialization, formal instruction, and apprentice-like on-the-job training. We can make sense of these disparate stages if we see a thread of spiritual maturation running through nearly all learning after about age 10. The guidance of middle schools, with its attendant and often rigorous discipline, is centered on building the child's character. Precisely because the child is approaching adulthood, there is an increase in the focus on perfecting the self by facing severe challenges. Such a focus, whether found in the obsession within university student clubs or devotion to one's job, recurs throughout the lives of modern Japanese.

This underlies the powerful tendency to perfectionism in Japanese culture. Perfecting the self means perfecting one's attitudes and, more important, one's performance. This emphasis has a long history in Confucian thought (see Tu Wei-ming,

The Self as Creative Transformation). Rohlen (1973, 1976) has labeled this ideology "spiritualism" (*seishin*) and has shown that it plays an increasingly central role in the Japanese understanding of learning. Although this ideology is associated with adult learning, it flows out of a socialization model for childhood that is different, inherently (and culturally) prior, and less well articulated. What is constant is the group context.

When the child or learner is in an initial stage, all that can be expected is that they learn to behave in a particular group context. Children naturally play and learn to get along with each other; the potter's apprentice sweeps the floor and tries to keep out from underfoot. Only after the basic socialization to the group's activities is complete is the learner ready to accept the more demanding tasks needed for mastery and for reflection (*hansei*). Both the rationale and model for good behavior and the justification for self-perfection derive from the prior assumed importance of the group context.

Not even most adult training is done in the name of the company. A great deal of personally meaningful learning also occurs among adults that is strictly voluntary and unrelated to practical ends. Pursuits such as the tea ceremony or ink painting occupy people's free time. These pursuits are typically highly structured by Western standards, and they intensify as retirement approaches. A high proportion of the population participates, and given Japan's relatively early retirement and its longevity rates, a significant proportion of the normal life course is open for self-reflection and self-perfection.

As Hare (this volume) relates, many of those who pay for instruction in Noh acting are people who will never perform. Having mastered the basics of life – family, job, and friends – most Japanese apparently hunger for more learning. Not only do private organizations (such as the systems of licensed teachers and schools that dominate the traditional arts) offer a variety of things to be learned, but the government itself spends a tremendous amount on "social education" (*shakai kyōiku*) aimed at providing a range of classes for the "silver set."

Yet this path is also a trap. Hori (this volume) shows that merely to memorize a hundred sutras brings no enlightenment. Just doing routines does not guarantee insight. The form can become a false promise. In the end, to truly move beyond the

authority of highly perfected forms represented by memorization and repetition, the Japanese student must in some sense leave the well-trod path, set aside the dictates of convention and form, and find the key to a realm of understanding that is personal. This journey to true independence cannot be misunderstood as a shortcut, however, since only a thorough mastery of what is given establishes the foundation to move beyond it. Ironic as it may seem, this final stage of adult advancement begins to replicate, in style and philosophy, the spontaneity and playfulness of early childhood education.

Old age, ideally the age of mastery and self-perfection, is a time (as Hare, this volume, relates) to descend again (developmentally speaking) and have fun. In line with Confucian and Shinto views, mastery of life gives license to experiment and create, to circle back to the playfulness of childhood. It should not come as a surprise to Westerners, then, to see the transformation of their friends in the first few years of retirement: The ostensibly rule-bound, workaholic company man may now be spending much of his time perfecting his watercolors or Chinese cooking skills. A woman who has rushed from her job to her home in order to make dinner and run errands now practices her folk dance form late into the night in preparation for her group's coming performance. These persons are simply exercising the earned right to follow their own fancies and to study whatever they wish, typically still in the name of self-perfection.

The overall picture of Japanese learning as it relates to the life cycle, then, is one quite different from our stereotypes. It begins by confronting the reality of a shared social experience. The notion of childhood differs and moves toward increased discipline with adolescence. Adulthood is not a plateau of learning; rather, it is an extended period rich in challenges and opportunities to improve.

For over one hundred years, public schools have occupied the attention of educational researchers both in and out of Japan. However, before 1872, childhood learning experiences were far more diverse than they are today. Boys may have been apprenticed at about age twelve, they may have attended a local "school" in a temple or neighbor's house, or they may have attended a fief school if they were part of the warrior elite. Knowledge was not readily codifiable, nor was there a clear

image of teaching as a profession. Prospects for boys and girls differed enormously.

The rapid implementation of a national school system not only eliminated many of these traditional forms of learning and teaching but also subordinated those that survived. The serious business of national development and the rising power of the state took center stage, embodied in a nationwide uniformity of public schooling. All preexisting forms were made peripheral and, to a degree, dependent. They survived by doing what the public school system chose not to do. Although apprenticeships, for example, exist today, they are found only in the traditional arts and crafts. Moreover, although today's tutoring academies (called *juku*) have premodern origins, they are dependent on their role of supplementing the character of the public school system. In other words, the Westernized version of school dominates the learning scene, and most other learning situations are defined in reference to it.

Learning, however, is not confined to the space defined by public schooling. Beginning in childhood, most children are exposed to the peripheral worlds of academic tutoring, artistic expression (i.e., music lessons, calligraphy classes), and character-building activities (judo or kendo). Indeed, the public schools have become tacitly reliant on these supplementary activities to a degree. That is, teachers can expect slower students to get outside help and can expect motivated parents to provide a range of educational experiences for their children. Where cram schools are numerous, for example, teachers are under less pressure to teach to a low common denominator; they are also less obligated to do exam preparatory work.

This implies that a symbiotic relation exists between the public schools (under the jurisdiction of the monolithic bureaucracy of the Ministry of Science, Culture, and Education) and the diverse private teaching activities for children (*juku*) – organized as commercial enterprises.

The cram school is the most common and notorious form of *juku*. Before we decry the degradation of *juku*-based learning as simply rote memorization, however, we must examine our own prejudices and assumptions about learning. Americans have developed a fine dichotomy between rote and critical thinking; one is good, the other bad. How valid is this distinction, especially outside our cultural sphere? Certainly, accomplishments in the

arts, in athletics, and in much else begins with repetitive imitation. We learn to walk and talk and think largely by imitation, too. If this is true, why should it not be true of academic learning, at least to some degree? Japanese tutoring schools often help children master subjects by giving them supplemental exercises (a kind of rote learning) by which they "deepen the grooves of their learned patterns" (i.e., their memory of relationships as well as of details). Math speed tests are an example, but so is repeated practice in solving word problems or filling in names on blank maps. Russell's study of kumon *juku* (this volume) helps us grasp the interrelationship of such institutions and the public schools. As she illustrates, cram schools may actually permit responsiveness to other pedagogical approaches within the public system. The exercises, drills, and rote learning of *juku* serve as the basis for problem solving and practical application as taught in a more discovery-based and critical (or "constructivist") manner by public school teachers. There is reinforcement, and even tacit mutual dependence, between the two.

Programs like the Suzuki Method (Peak, this volume), flower arranging classes, and the martial arts also have complex relationships to the public system. Their general claim is that they cultivate self-improvement and build character. Their argument is that public schools pay insufficient attention to these matters. They too are part of a larger developmental formula. The cultivation of both spiritual and academic pursuits outside of school points to the high expectations Japanese parents have of the learning process: Their ambitions are not situated within the school alone or within modern Western notions of human development.

Turning from the centrality of the public schools to actual classroom teaching, we encounter many details of instruction that resonate with our general discovery of a distinctly Japanese approach to methodologies and technique. A number of essays (by Shin-ying Lee and colleagues, by Tsuchida and Lewis, and by Stigler and coauthors) document the attention to detailed lesson planning typical of Japanese teachers.

Compare the lesson plans that Stigler and his colleagues present. The typical American lesson plan is a bare outline – literally less than a paragraph. The Japanese outline is a detailed set of concepts complete with illustrations, comprising several para-